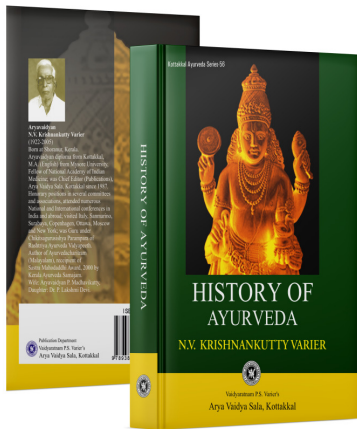


“HISTORY OF AYURVEDA” : A text on scientific disclose of the evolution of *ayurveda*

Vyshna Ravindran¹, Binitha A.², Jigeesh P.P.³



Introduction

According to Edmund Burke’s famous dictum, ‘Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it’, history holds importance because it will help us getting a comprehensive idea of the past and can potentially serve as a template for the future. From this perspective, the history of medicine is intriguing. Ayurvedic science, an ancient Indian medical tradition, weaves mysticism and veils of divinity throughout its historical facets. The need for such glorification was to render it socially permissible and not meant to dissuade the inquisitive nature. Separating the history from the mythical narratives within the context of the societal framework will give us a clear picture of its evolution. Such an attempt is made through the book “*History of Ayurveda*”. It is authored by N.V Krishnankutty Varier and published by Arya Vaidya Sala, Kottakkal. The

first edition of the book which contains 369 pages, is priced at Rs 160.

The author, NVK Varier was born in the 20th century, during the time when there was a resurgence of interest in *ayurveda* and a demand for a scientific justification for the practice. He received an Aryavaidyan diploma from Kottakkal as well as an M.A. in English from Mysore University and was also a Fellow of the National Academy of Indian Medicine. He published a book , *Ayurvedacaritram* in Malayalam in the year 1980, which was later translated to English and restructured into the present form in the year 2005.

Contents

Introduction to this book was given by the famous historian, Dr. MGS Narayanan as it was the first effort on this field of ayurveda from the Southern part of the country. The book is divided into 6 sections. Section 1 titled “Primitive age” contains 4 chapters in which the author writes about the origin of *ayurveda*, classical texts in *ayurveda*, *ayurveda* through ages, and about Gods & sages respectively. He begins by describing the mystical references to the origin of *ayurveda* mentioned in each of the *Samhita*. Later he demystifies these stories and tries to give concreteness to these concepts. For example, while talking about Brahma, Varier states that it is a figurative statement pointing to the fact that it took shape at

1. PG Scholar

*Corresponding Author; Email: vyshna.2@gmail.com

2 Professor

3. Professor & HOD, Department of Panchakarma, VPSV Ayurveda College, Kottakkal, Kerala

the dawn of human life. He then continues to describe the evolution of medicine through the Vedic times – the journey from the primitive knowledge in the earlier phase to a more systematic approach during the times of *samhitas*. He highlights the fact that the *samhitas* are relatively free of tantric practices and are based on the principles of *darsana*. Parallely, he also mentions the medical developments of the Indus valley civilization from where the tantric sciences are believed to be developed. The influence of vedic and tantric streams of Indian thoughts on the medical system is described in the further chapters.

Section 2 titled “Age of codification” discusses the contents of different *samhitas* in 7 chapters. One chapter is exclusively devoted to *ayurveda* in the Buddhist era. He mentions that though there is evidence to conclude that *ayurveda* had spread to other countries from very early times, it was during the Buddhist era that *ayurveda* reached its zenith glory. The spread of *ayurveda* to different regions including China and Southeast Asian countries along with Asoka’s propagation of Buddhism is detailed in this section. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how later civil wars and internal crises led to *ayurveda*’s decline; a discipline that had been vibrant until then had become a frozen tradition.

The 3rd Section titled “Different branches” contains 4 chapters and details the various historical evolution of different branches of science such as obstetrics, paediatrics, demonology, alchemy and a few other works. He highlights the fact that though alchemy is believed to be a relatively new science, evidence shows that *kanmada* (*Śilajit*) and other minerals found in Mohanjo Daro and Indus valley civilization were believed to be collected and preserved for medicinal use.

Section 4 titled “Therapies for plants and animals” contains 3 chapters that talk about *asvayurveda*,

hastyayurveda, and *vrkshayurveda*. Veterinary sciences and horticulture in ancient India are discussed in much detail. Contents of *Saalihotram* – a text on *asvayurveda* and *Paalakaapyam* – an elaborate work on elephants are summarized here. The section on *vrkshayurveda* contains details on *kunapajala* – artificial liquid manure, methods to produce seedless fruit and other practices of ancient agriculture.

Section 5 titled “Comparative study” talks about the similarities of ancient systems of therapy in 3 chapters. For example in the chapters he mentions that India and Modern-day Iran seemed to have similar practices of medicine. In fact, references of Kankayana, the physician from Bahlika (i.e) modern-day Iran and northern Afghanistan in ayurvedic texts shows that the medical practices prevalent in Bahlika have influenced *ayurveda* and the other way around. He mentions references to such similarities between the medical systems that existed in ancient Egypt, Rome, Greece, China and others. He tries to paint a picture of how boundaries were no barrier to the spread of knowledge and traditions through these chapters.

Section 6 talks about ayurvedic education. In 4 chapters he describes ayurvedic education up to the 18th century, education in the modern era, *ayurveda* in Kerala, and the past 100 years of ayurvedic education respectively.

Analysis

A timely compilation of works on history can make us better prepared for the future. Compilation on history of *ayurveda* is successfully attempted by many authors. This particular book on ayurvedic history becomes one of a kind because of the approach it takes in making a scientific disclosure of the glorious history. For example, the author says that the symposium at the foothills of the Himalayas might even be a dramatic description adopted to bring out the diverse opinions. The

book talks not just about the evolution of *ayurveda* in India but also takes a global perspective in understanding the evolution of medical systems. The influence of the various traditional systems of medicine and similarities between them are discussed in much detail which makes this work a unique contribution.

The text has managed to interpret the facts of medical science in its relation to social evolution. The history of any system cannot be studied in isolation. Its relevance with respect to the social and cultural norms is what makes it significant. This text has managed to tie these two together beautifully. For example, the veils of divinity and perfection in the medical systems were used initially to bestow faith among the people. Greek medicine, the origin of allopathy too had used these veils in the beginning. But with the golden age of the Greek medical system which is associated with the age of Hippocrates, these veils were broken to bring out the science from the cult. A similar trend of evolution was observed in India during the time of *samhitas*.

The author also attempts to resolve conflicts throughout the work, beginning with the disagreement surrounding the time of composition of the *Caraka samhita* and *Susruta samhita*. The author puts forward that though the teachings of *Caraka samhita* were conceived much earlier, the book only took shape after the era of *Susruta samhita*.

Another highlight of the book is how it has comprehensively incorporated the evolution of veterinary sciences and horticulture in India. The preparation of *kunapajalam* is mentioned here, in which portions of animals carcasses having plenty of marrow, fat and lard are taken, mixed together and boiled in water. To these, powders of sesame seeds and black gram are added, and then mixed with milk, honey and hot water. This mixture is then exposed to the sun for a fortnight.

This liquid manure is said to enable mushroom growth of the plants. Somewhere in the timeline of evolution, *ayurveda* for humans managed to take the centre stage. Now again, with the advent of much attention on the concepts of one health, *ayurveda* for animals and plants is gaining popularity. At such a stage, texts like *Salihotram* and *Paalakaapyam* would gain much relevance.

It is a user-friendly work because of the order in which the texts unfold the easy language it employs, and its comprehensiveness. The scientific disclosure that the book aims to make will undoubtedly elicit a spirit of inquiry in all of its readers.

Though the chapter on the history of *ayurveda* in Kerala falls short of capturing the depth and breadth of the science in Kerala, it does trigger the necessity to explore *ayurveda*'s evolution by region. The chapter also outlines the importance to explore the influence of *ayurveda* on local health practices and the other way around. The inclusion of a history of the evolution of *ayurveda* in various regions of India would have made the text more thorough. For the upcoming edition, these considerations might be taken into account.

Conclusion

The history of medicine is a fascinating subject. Studying history is not to glorify the past but to help us guide the future. As civilization evolves, disease patterns change and so do the medical systems. A timely compilation of such works on history will help us in getting a comprehensive idea of the past and can potentially serve as a template for the future. The history of *ayurveda* shouldn't be a mere compilation of mysticism and divinity but the actual evolution of the science in the background of the social structure in a global framework. *History of ayurveda* by NVK Varier embodies this very spirit and thus becomes a must-read for every ayurvedic student.